"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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The Church With Wide Horizons*

By Edward Krusen Ziegler

When I was a boy growing up in the country-side just north of Philadelphia, here was a church which stood literally at the center of our community. On one of he highest hills at the exact geographical center of Limerick Township, was a lovely hite church in which the Lutheran and Reformed congregations worshipped. From almost very spot in the township, and many miles beyond, the slender, white spire of imerick Center church could be seen. When I return to that community now, the hurch looks much smaller than it did when I was a boy, but it is still a symbol of he rural church at its best. It was at the center of our life; its spire pointing oward the heavens suggested the nearness and glory of God. The fact that the congre-ationsof two great churches worshipped there and shared in a warm fellowship made it witness to cooperation. The pastor of the Lutheran Church, Dr. Schmidt, served hat congregation for more than fifty years. He was a symbol of the abiding fellow-hip of that church. We had our public school commencements there and it became for any young people the symbol for great achievement and a new vision of life ahead. I ovet for every rural church the position of centrality in the community which that ld church seemed to hold.

As we consider here the Church With Wide Horizons--we shall see some of the ays in which the rural church is changing and try to discover some new horizons, some ew lines of strategy for the church in the country-side in our time.

I. THE RURAL CHURCH FACES CHANGE

The rural church of today faces more rapid and significant change than at ny time in its history. Let me suggest several of the areas of change:

1. Country churches are growing fewer and smaller. Not all are growing smaller ut many, alarmingly many, are decreasing in size and influence. There are many ommunities where there are far too many churches. If the decreased number of churches eant consolidation and cooperation with a better program, then the decrease would be ood. But, alas, that is not always the case. There are still more than ten thousand ommunities in America where there is no church at all. There are millions of rural outh who are completely untouched by religious teaching. This is an intolerable ituation.

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*An address delivered at the annual meeting of the Rural Life Association, Earlham College, Richmond, Indiana, December, 1946. Rev. Edward Krusen Ziegler is well known to readers of this Bulletin. He has recently resigned his position as Associate Professor of Religion at Manchester College to become pastor of the Church of the Brethren at Bridgewater, Virginia. Printed with kind permission of Mr. Ziegler and of the Rural Life Association.

2. The influence of the city. Again, the influence of the city upon the rural church is often powerful and harmful. There is a constant drain of leadership from the country to urban centers. This is normal and to a certain extent wholesome. But there are too many churches where almost the entire active and competent leadership has gone. A great old rural church in the mountains of West Virginia has during the past seventy years sent a constant stream of its finest young people to be pastors, missionaries, and school teachers in other areas. For a long time the church seemed to thrive on a policy of sharing its best with others. But today that church is having a difficult struggle because of inadequate leadership at home.

The poisonous rays of urban influence are spreading farther and farther. Any community within forty miles of a large city is strongly influenced by the pagan cultur of the city. The rural home and community have been powerfully invaded by paganism coming on the wings of the radio, the moving picture, newspaper advertising and the almost fatal ease of communication and transportation. These result in a marked urban dominance of rural community, family, and church life.

3. A third factor of change is the serious trend toward secularization of agricultural life. This trend was first brought forcibly to my attention in India. A brilliant and devoted Indian leader, Rao Bahadur S. N. Mukerji, of Baroda State, suggested to me that, much as he appreciated the work of missionaries, he felt that in part at least we were guilty of secularizing the life of the Indian farmer. He pointed out that there is an appropriate religious observance for practically every act or process in the life of the Indian farmer. Many of these are based, to be sure, upon superstition and fear; but when a man becomes Christian he finds release from superstition and fear. He learns a more spiritual approach to religion but with that he often gets the impression that there are no acts of religion associated with the acts and processes of his farming career. Therefore, he frequently compartmentalizes his religi and carries on his farming without reference to it. Is it not possible that we have do the same thing in America? Has not scientific farming and a religion which is too heavily balanced with speculative theology resulted in an almost total divorce of religion from rural living? The church is not wholly responsible for this trend but it i not without blame. One of our major tasks in the restoration is the intimate and vital tionship of religion and agricultural life.

But even our failures and our difficulties can teach us much. These areas of portentous change merely point the way in which the Christian church may put its Gospel at the very center in the rebuilding of rural America.

II. NEW HORIZONS FOR THE RURAL CHURCH

There are certain basic principles which the church must follow if it is to be a real factor in the rebuilding of rural America. Let it be said without equivocation that the church must be a thoroughly Christian church if it is to have power. The country church has a unique role. It is not merely a club nor a glorified communit forum. The word of the Oxford Conference to Christendom, "Let the church be the church is wholly relevant to the rural church of our time. The country church is really a force which brings the eternal Gospel of Christ to rural people. Its one unique role is that of relating people to God vitally through evangelism and worship, and thus providing an adequate basis for real community.

There are six areas which offer new and vast horizons for the thought and activity of the rural church:

1. Restoring the Sense of Community. Rural people find that the increasing perplexity of life and the far wider contacts we have tend to destroy the sense of 'belonging,' just as in the cities, but to a lesser degree. The fact that we see more people and hear the voices of more people than before, does not mean that we have a

er fellowship with them. Far too many rural neighborhoods have practically lost sense of close-knit fellowship.. The country church in which I grew up, not the one loned in the introduction of this paper, met this need for belonging in a very tive way. We belonged not only to the church of God but to each other. Our joys sorrows were intimately shared. Some of us had heard the facetious remark that "A church is made up of a lot of people who do not know each other and are glad they do while a country church is made up of a lot of people who know each other and are they do." But we did not believe it. There were rifts in our fellowship at s. But that fellowship could operate, for example, there came a year when crops poor on my father's farm. Christmas brought us only small and inexpensive presents, they were appreciated because of the love which prompted them. Then late in the er two of our best cows died. On a Sunday shortly after this disaster, one of the ons and his family came along home with us after church and ate dinner with us. time in the afternoon in a lull in the conversation the deacon pulled out an envelope in an embarrassed little speech told how the church was concerned with our losses then gave the envelope to my father. It contained nearly $60.00, which was substan- help indeed. Far more than the material aid, the sense of fellowship strengthened family during those difficult days.

The sense of community which the church can develop operates in three ways: (a) sense of community of space. We are aware of the tremendous progress of transpor- on and communication. Science has made us neighbors; only the church can make us hers. The church has a great opportunity to develop in Christian farmers the sense rotherhood with the farmers of Germany, Russia, India, South Africa, and to the most parts of the earth. The Heifer Program of relief, the Seeds of Good Will ram and the many other ways in which farmers have been sharing their material goods a hungry world all help to develop this powerful sense of world brotherhood. Most he effective missionaries to the rural peoples of the world have come from our try churches.

(b) The new sense of community which the rural church needs will strengthen the ing of brotherhood in time. The magnificent eleventh chapter of Hebrews is not a treatise on faith but it is also a great catalog of the heroes of Godly living, cloud of witnesses which give continuity and inspiration to the church in our time. rural church needs to be aware of the Biblical heroes and of the great succession rophets and men of God since Biblical times. How the mind kindles to think of stine, of Francis of Assissi, of the Waldensions, of Huss, Luther and Calvin, of Frederick Oberlin, the Wesleys, George Fox, and Alexander Mack, and in our own of Stanley Jones and Brayton Case, of Kagawa and Schweitzer and all of the great who are bringing the Christian Gospel to bear on the country-sides of the world.

(c) The sense of community will also make us aware of the eternal and universal equences of good and evil. Country people as well as urban people need this sense he urgency and moral basis of their brotherhood. Further, the church must provide tuary for the sinners, the lonely and the lost. There are many of them in our rural hborhoods. It is our job to win them and make them feel at home, and to restore them heir place in the community of God.

2. <u>To provide a comprehensive program of Christian nurture for the community.</u> often the rural church has conceived its function narrowly and provided for it ly. From childhood to old age and for all sorts and conditions of men the church esponsible. We have taken pride in saying that the church is a real melting-pot is it actually so? Thomas Tripp has pointed out that many of the emotional sects h are developing in the rural areas owe their phenomenal growth to the fact that established churches simply do not welcome the poorer classes of rural society. of our rural churches are frankly and clearly class churches. Unless the church come to the point where it is deeply, vitally and creatively concerned about the gious welfare of the whole community it may as well close its doors.

3. The Country Church Must be the Champion of Cooperation. In many respects the old Limerick Center Church mentioned at the beginning of this paper was a symbol of such cooperation. In a disintegrating society there is no other agency which can so vitally promote and so effectively demonstrate genuine cooperation as the church. But what chance does it have to do so unless it demonstrates in its corporate life a spiri of cooperating brotherly love? If that is present and the various churches of the community begin to work together for the good of the whole people, then the church can greatly aid in growing cooperation among all community agencies. There are outstandin examples in America of how the church has become the central cooperating agency in the community. In many cases it has given spiritual basis and impetus to the work done by the farm bureau, the 4-H Clubs, the school and all other community enterprises. The church must provide the kind of character which will make cooperation by these other agencies practical.

4. The Church Must be the Conscience of the Community. It was said once that "Lambeth must be the conscience for Westminster." What was meant was that the church had to provide the moral climate and the spiritual basis for good government and natio life. No one else has the key to spiritual living. No one else can provide the relig rootage of faith and the eternal sanctions for right and wrong growing out of the Bibl It is the job of the rural church therefore, to praise the good in the community consi ently and impartially. It is likewise the job of the church to condemn evil and fight manfully against it, but always with humility and sorrow, never with vindictiveness an hate. The church must often deal with moral problems penitently because it has been slow in teaching the good and ineffective in demonstrating it. It has often been com- placent in the presence of certain great evils and bitterly hostile toward others. A church which harbors race prejudice in its own ranks and in its church policies can scarcely give moral leadership to the fight for interracial brotherhood and justice in the community. A church which starves its minister and fails to pay its bills can scarcely be a powerful agency for integrity and economic justice in the community.

5. To teach stewardship of the holy earth. Has the church no share in promoting the conservation of soil, timber, pure water and wild life? While the church is con- demning sin, let it condemn most vigorously the sins against God's creation. Through its teaching and great acts of worship the church may lift up the stewardship of the holy earth into the light of Christian duty and the will of God. This sense of stewa ship will never come to our rural people to abide until the church makes it a matter of concern, prayer, teaching, and dedication. There is ample teaching in the Bible t justify this emphasis. Further, the church must lift up the sense of sharing of the gifts of the good earth. One of the livest acts of worship which I have ever seen was a service of dedication of a herd of more than fifty heifers which were about to sail for Puerto Rico. Stewardship and sharing were seen in the light of the will and prais of the Eternal Father.

6. Strengthening the Family. The rural church is realizing now that it can never rise higher than the level of family life in its membership. It must take the growing appreciation of rural life as a natural setting for the Christian family, and lift it up as a major emphasis in teaching and worship. The church has the duty and privilege of developing a new and more Christian philosophy of family life. It must teach rural people anew the duty and joy of having large families and providing real homes for them. Even in our rural homes, family life has fallen upon evil days. Many rural families today are too small--too small even to maintain the level of rural leadership and population, to say nothing of providing that constant stream of rein- forcement which alone makes city population stable. There is only one city in America of over 100,000 population which produces enough children to maintain its size; that is Salt Lake City. Our rural families must be large enough to maintain the strength of the population of America from the best sources.

But the concern of the Christian church is not only for large families, it is r good families and Christian patterns of family living. The church must teach young ople to be good home builders and good parents. The church must show the spiritual lues of living near the soil, of agriculture as a way of life rather than as a business, family cooperation in creative living. It must greatly strengthen and undergird ristian family life in all its aspects or it will perish from the face of the earth.

CONCLUSION

Having pointed out these six directions for the rural church of today, these x new horizons toward which the church must look if it is to apply the Christian spel to the life of rural people, there remains but one thing to be said. It is equired of us that we restore in ourselves and in our best young people the God-given ense of vocation to rural life, of dedication to these tasks which are before us. atholic youth speak of rural life as their Apostolate. It is a phrase which we all ay revently use. Many of us are called of God to be Christian farmers, to engage in he professions as Christian rural folks, to go into Christian rural business, and to alk the country roads with Christ as rural ministers. There are today and have been or the past two or three centuries some outstanding rural apostles. Oberlin, Kagawa, ther Liguttti, Warren Wilson, Eugene Smathers and scores of others have taken seriously he suggestion of Christ "Feed my sheep; tend my lambs." Shall we follow in their rain?

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